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What reading teachers should know about ESL learners

Good teaching is teaching for all. These strategies will help English-language learners, but they will help typical learners as well.

According to figures released by the U.S. Census Bureau, the foreign-born population of the United States was 31.1 million in 2000. This figure is 57% more than the 1990 figure and represents 11.1% of the total population. Classrooms across the United States have English Language Learners (ELLs) who are learning to speak, read, and write in their new language. These students offer a rich resource of diversity that can enhance classroom dynamics. At the same time, they present a special challenge to classroom teachers and reading specialists alike. Out of nearly 3 million public school teachers surveyed by the National Center for Education Statistics, 41% report teaching limited English proficient (LEP) students, while only 12.5% have received eight or more hours of training (*NCELA Newslines Bulletin*, 2002).

There are some similarities between reading in a first language and reading in a second one. Accomplished readers in their first language tend to use many of the same strategies that successful native English-language readers do—skimming, guessing in context, reading for the gist of a text—when they are reading in a second language. But it would be a mistake to think that learning to read in a second language is simply a mapping process during which the reader uses the same set of strategies in precisely the same manner.

Support for students

In this article, I list some of the factors that can complicate the reading process for nonnative

speakers of English and continue by offering suggestions and strategies that can support students as they strive to acquire English-language skills. The order of the factors presented is not hierarchical. Any one may be more important than the others, depending on the specific circumstance. I have included a Table that will give you an idea of when (before, during, or after a student reads) and for whom these activities have proven useful in the past. You may see the possibility of using an approach at a different time in your lesson, or for learners at different levels than those that I suggest. Feel free to adapt strategies for your particular situation if your learners differ in age or need, as they surely will.

I must add one pedagogical note here. You may begin to wonder, as you read, if a strategy described as being helpful for one category (developing cultural schema, for example) might be equally useful in another, such as helping a student gain academic proficiency. The answer is a resounding yes. The strategies linked to various categories are illustrative, not prescriptive. They represent best practices and so are often able to support students' reading development in a number of different areas.

Conversational versus academic proficiency

An English as a second language (ESL) learner may appear able to handle the demands of functioning in an English-only classroom because she or he is competent in a variety of school settings—talking with a friend in the corridor, playing ball on the playground, or speaking with the teacher one on one. It might seem natural to assume that a child

Suggested strategy implementation

Strategy	English language level				When to implement		
	Young English-language learners	Beginning readers	Transitional readers	Advanced readers	Before reading	During reading	After reading
Previewing		✓	✓		✓		
Choral reading	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Shared reading	✓					✓	
Paired reading		✓	✓			✓	✓
Books with tapes	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Multicultural literature	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Language experience	✓	✓			✓		
Interactive writing	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Total physical response	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Narrow reading			✓	✓		✓	
Read aloud	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

learning English as a second language becomes fully fluent quickly. But researchers have found that, although ELLs can develop peer-appropriate conversational skills in about two years, developing academic proficiency in English can take much longer. Academic proficiency here refers to the ability not only to use language for reading and writing but also to acquire information in content areas. In most cases it takes an English-language learner as long as five to seven years to perform as well academically as native English-speaking peers (Collier & Thomas, 1999; Cummins, 1989). This lag occurs because the initial gap between native speakers and ELLs continues to persist. “Native English speakers are not sitting around waiting for ESL students to catch up. They are continuing to make 1 year’s progress in 1 year’s time in their English language development and in every school subject” (Collier & Thomas, 1999, p. 1). English-language learners have to gain more language proficiency each year than their native-speaking peers in order to catch up and close the gap.

What you can do in the classroom

In conversation, the setting, body language, facial expressions, gestures, intonation, and a variety of other cues help English-language learners understand meaning. Academic English has fewer

contextual cues. You can help by providing context for your students before they begin reading text that may prove challenging for them. One helpful technique is previewing reading sections before students read. Chen and Graves (1998) provided a model for previewing that can easily be used in classrooms with ELLs. It is also an excellent strategy for native speakers whose reading skills are not yet on a par with their conversation skills. Previewing works well with students in grades 3 through 12.

Start by making a few statements or asking some rhetorical questions that hook the students’ interest. Then, relate the passage students are going to read to something that is familiar to them. Next, provide a brief discussion question that will engage the students and, after that, provide an overview of the section they are about to read. Name the selection, introduce the characters, and describe the plot (up to, but not including, the climax). Last, direct the students to read the story and look for particular information. Chen and Graves (1998) provided the following example based on “Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry: “Now, read the story and find out why Della went into this shop, what she did there, and what happened later to the young couple on this Christmas Eve” (p. 571).

Providing so much preparation prior to reading is one way to ensure that students are receiving

comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981). Comprehensible input is spoken or written language that is delivered at a level the child can understand. At the same time, the level should be enough of a challenge that the child needs to stretch just a bit above his or her current abilities. Krashen called this important level “I + 1,” with “I” standing for input.

McCauley and McCauley (1992) suggested choral reading as a means of providing comprehensible input for ESL students. Choral reading involves the recitation of a poem or short text, along with motions and gestures that help the children dramatically act out the meaning. The many repetitions of reading a selection provide an opportunity to recycle the language, and the dramatic gestures and motions provide contextual clues about the poem’s meaning. Choral reading is appropriate for students in kindergarten through sixth grade. For students in kindergarten or first grade, choral reading can be enhanced through the use of rebus symbols.

Orthography and phonology

Listening and reading are closely connected. At its most basic level, reading is the phonological decoding of written text, and written text is the representation of sounds heard when language is spoken. Ehri and Wilce (1985) separated native English-speaking kindergartners into groups according to their ability to read words. Prereaders had not yet learned to read at all; two other groups had learned to read only a few words or several different words. The children were taught to read words with two different kinds of spellings: simplified spellings that corresponded to sounds and visually distinctive words with spellings that did not correspond at all to their sound. Prereaders with no previous reading experience were able to read the visual spellings more easily than the phonetic spellings. The other children, with some experience reading, were more able to learn the phonetic spellings. In other words, children who had begun learning how to read had already started moving toward an orientation incorporating sound/symbol correspondence.

Researchers have also noted that differences between languages with deep orthographic structures (having many irregular sound-letter corre-

spondences) versus shallow ones (having mainly regular sound-letter correspondences) might cause difficulty for some nonnative readers of English (Grabe, 1991; Paulesu et al., 2001; Wade-Woolley, 1999). Paulesu et al. examined the connection between dyslexia and cultural conventions in orthography. The researchers found that although dyslexia is a genetic disorder, its occurrence appears unevenly distributed across languages. For example, the prevalence of dyslexia in Italy is about half that of the United States. Beginning with the accepted assumption that there was a causal link between phonological processing deficits and brain abnormality, researchers looked at the orthography of various languages in relation to their phonetic material. They concluded that dyslexics in languages such as Italian that have a shallow orthography may be less affected in their ability to read. The dyslexia, in effect, remains hidden. In deep orthography languages such as English, literacy impairments may be aggravated.

What you can do in the classroom

Shared reading provides English-language learners with an opportunity to hear language while observing its corresponding phonological representation. McCarrier, Pinnell, and Fountas (2000) defined shared reading as “you and your students read[ing] together from a single, enlarged text” (p. 18). Naturally, the writing should be large enough to be seen from a distance, and the text should be positioned so that it is in clear view of all of the children. Aside from its obvious support for learners of English who need help in word-by-word matching, shared reading also helps children learn left-to-right directionality (McCarrier et al.). This may give extra dividends for ELLs whose native orthography differs from English’s left-to-right, top-to-bottom directionality. Shared reading can be used in the early elementary years, from kindergarten through third grade. As always, choosing reading materials with an appropriate reading level is a critical factor. For kindergarten and first-grade students, rebus symbols can be used in place of some or most of the text.

Li and Nes (2001) found that paired reading was also useful in helping ESL students read more fluently and accurately. They paired ELLs with a “skilled reader” who read a portion of text aloud

while the language learner read along. The language learner then reread the same text aloud. The researchers found that paired reading was an effective intervention that improved the students' fluency in reading aloud, as well as their pronunciation. Paired reading works well with students who have developed some independent social skills and task follow-through. In general, students in grades 3 through 8 can pair-read successfully. Younger students require more structure.

Studies of learning-disabled students have found that children benefit from the simultaneous listening and reading of audiotaped stories (Conte & Humphreys, 1989; Janiak, 1983). Rasinski (1990) found that listening while reading was effective in improving reading fluency. Casbergue and Harris (1996) noted that audiobooks "provide a means for engaging youngsters who are not habituated to print" (p. 4).

Although the typical ESL student is not learning disabled, the sound/symbol correspondence in these studies is interesting. Consider providing ELLs with books and corresponding audiotapes. Books and tapes work well with any student who can independently read text (grades 2 through 12). For kindergarten and first-grade students, books and tapes provide an opportunity to hear the sounds of English as well as learn basic literacy practices like page turning, tracking left to right, and making meaningful connections between words and illustrations. The tapes can be recorded by the teacher or by other students in the class. Providing exposure to books and corresponding tapes gives language learners an opportunity to simultaneously hear the sounds and see the corresponding graphic representation. The word *simultaneous* is the key here. Students need many opportunities to both hear the spoken word and see its graphic representation. Children who have listened to and read a story many times can be encouraged to read aloud along with the tape while listening to the story.

Cultural differences and schema

Schema theory holds that comprehending a text involves an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text itself (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). In other words, comprehension requires more than linguistic knowledge.

Consider the following passage offered by Eskey (2002): "It was the day of the big party. Mary wondered if Johnny would like a kite. She ran to her bedroom, picked up her piggy bank, and shook it. There was no sound" (p. 6). Eskey asked us to consider a series of questions about the reading:

- when the story took place—past, present, or future;
- what Mary wondered;
- the meaning of *would*;
- the definition of *kite*;
- the definition of *piggy bank*;
- the nature of the party in the text;
- if Mary and Johnny are adults or children;
- how the kite is related to the party;
- why Mary shook her piggy bank; and
- what Mary's big problem was.

The point that Eskey made with this exercise is that the first five questions posed can be answered by directly searching the text, as long as the reader knows the vocabulary and English structures. The second five questions, however, are far more difficult to answer unless the reader possesses the schema of a child's birthday party in the United States. The questions cannot be answered without this specific cultural information. A native speaker of English, however, is easily able to construct a correct interpretation of the text.

Other studies have noted the importance of cultural differences and schema. Carrell (1987) studied 52 ESL students: 28 Muslim Arabs and 24 Catholic Hispanics. Each student read two different texts, one with a Muslim orientation and the other with a Catholic orientation. The researcher found that the students better remembered and comprehended those texts most similar to their native cultures.

Droop and Verhoeven (1998) studied third graders becoming literate in Dutch both as a first and second language. The children read three different kinds of texts: texts that referred to Dutch culture, texts that referred to the cultures of the immigrant children, and neutral texts. It is not surprising that the researchers found that the children had better reading comprehension and reading efficiency with texts that were culturally familiar.

What you can do in the classroom

When possible, choose texts that will match the cultural schemata and background knowledge of your English-language learners. Folk tales that are translations of stories children may have heard in their native language are especially helpful. Students will be able to relate more easily to books that depict characters that are similar to them. Two concept books for kindergarten and first-grade children, *Red Is a Dragon* and *Round Is a Mooncake* (Thong, 2000, 2002), have delightful illustrations of Asian children and simple language introducing colors and shapes. *The Ugly Vegetables* (Lin, 1999) is a picture book suitable for grades 1 through 4. It tells the story of a young Chinese girl who feels different from her American friends because of the strange vegetables her mother grows in their garden. When the vegetables ripen, her mother makes a delicious soup that everyone in the neighborhood enjoys, and the girl learns to value her culture as a result.

Another picture book good for first through third grade, *The Iguana Brothers* (Johnston, 1995), tells the tale of two lizard siblings in English, with an occasional word in Spanish. The Spanish vocabulary can be easily understood through context by native English speakers. However, the Spanish language and culturally appropriate illustrations may provide native Spanish speakers with a cultural context that makes the meanings that much more accessible.

Multicultural literature is a positive addition to the classroom for all students in all grades, from kindergarten through high school. Native speakers of English “need to be familiar with quality literature which can give the reader a realistic look at those many cultures” (McDonald, 1996, p. 1). In increasingly diverse U.S. classrooms, it is critical for books to reflect the cultural backgrounds of all students. Shiohita (1997) has culled information from several sources on how to select quality multicultural literature and offers the following tips:

- Books should be accurate and contain current information.
- Books should not reinforce stereotypes, but rather they should reflect the experiences of individuals.

- Illustrations should realistically depict individuals of different ethnicities.
- Stories should be appealing.

Another way to be certain that students fully share the context of the material they are reading is through the Language Experience Approach (LEA; Rigg, 1981). Language learners of all ages enjoy this approach, but in a classroom containing native English speakers LEA is generally more successful with students in grades 1 through 3. LEA involves having students tell the story of an experience they have had. The teacher acts as scribe, writing down the words so that the students can see what they look like. If the students have had a shared experience, such as a field trip or a visitor to the classroom, parts of the story come from all of the students in the class. After a story has been completed, the teacher can copy it onto a large sheet of chart paper so that students can practice reading it together. The rationale for using LEA can be summed up in these lines:

What I can think about I can talk about.

What I can say I can write.

What I can write I can read.

I can read what I write
and what other people write for me to read.

(R. Van Allen & G. Halvoren, as cited in Cantoni-Harvey, 1992, p. 178)

Interactive writing (McCarrier et al., 2000), in which children share the pen with their teacher, also allows children to share in the writing of a text that grows from their own experiences. In interactive writing, the teacher and the children negotiate the meaning of the text together and work together to produce it; the children are invited to contribute to the writing of the text on the basis of their instructional needs.

The idea is to help children attend to powerful examples that can enable them to learn something about the writing process that they can incorporate into their own writing. As children gain control of the process, the examples and areas of focus shift. (McCarrier et al., p. 11)

Interactive writing has been successful in the early grades, generally first through third.

Vocabulary

On a very basic level, vocabulary is critical to the reading process. Fluent first-language readers have large recognition vocabularies. There have been numerous studies attempting to quantify the actual number of words second-language readers need to know in order to comprehend a text. It is not surprising that some researchers have found that second-language learners need approximately the same number of words in their lexicon as first-language readers (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990). This need presents a particular challenge because of the large amount of prerequisite information ELLs must learn in order to be at a reading level comparable to their peers. W. Nagy & P. Herman (as cited in Bell, 1998) found that students between 3rd and 12th grade learn up to 3,000 new words each year. Classroom teachers are simply unable to teach this amount of vocabulary item by item.

In addition, many of the standard vocabulary-teaching approaches have been ineffective with ESL learners. Freeman and Freeman (2000) noted that although ELLs enjoy vocabulary exercises, they have trouble applying the information they memorize in context. According to Yeung (1999),

Given a separate glossary, when readers encounter an unfamiliar word, they need to leave the text, turn to the vocabulary list, temporarily store its meaning, and then revert to the text and try to incorporate the meaning into the text. (p. 197)

Yeung posited that the difficulty with providing students with preteaching vocabulary exercises or glossaries creates a cognitive load that splits the learner's attention. He found that when definitions are placed next to the challenging lexical items, students were better able to learn the meanings of unfamiliar words. He suggested that in this integrated format, students' attention is not split, and the cognitive load is lowered.

What you can do in the classroom

Although we cannot edit the materials our students use so that vocabulary definitions are integrated with the text, it is possible to encourage students to write word meanings on labels that are placed in the margins or as near the challenging item as possible. This may help to reduce the cognitive load and enhance vocabulary acquisition.

Labeling tends to be more successful with students who have a greater ability to work independently, generally grade 4 through high school. We can also explain meanings, or add synonyms for words that seem to cause (or seem likely to cause) difficulty for some of the students, as challenging words appear during the shared reading exercise described earlier.

Schunk (1999) suggested a different approach to vocabulary acquisition. She found that elementary school children (kindergarten through grade 5) who engaged in singing as a form of language rehearsal, paired with sign language, improved on receptive identification of targeted vocabulary. This approach is reminiscent of a language teaching methodology known as total physical response (TPR). TPR is "built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity" (Richards & Rodgers, 1998, p. 87). Encouraging children to act out songs such as "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and having them play games associated with language like Simon Says are other examples of this approach. Having children physically act out songs, poems, or readings—all forms of TPR methodology—is an effective way to support vocabulary development.

Schmitt and Carter (2000) suggested narrow reading as an effective method for developing vocabulary. In narrow reading, learners read authentic writing about the same topic in a number of different texts. By doing this, students are exposed to a common body of vocabulary. In this way, these words are recycled and ultimately integrated with the learner's vocabulary. There is not clear agreement about the number of times that a language learner must encounter a new lexical term before it is actually learned, but Zahar, Cobb, and Spada (2001) found that estimates range between 6 and 20 times, depending on the context in which exposure to the word occurs. Depending on the materials available, students in grades 2 or 3 all the way up through high school can engage in narrow reading.

Schmitt and Carter (2000) suggested the following kinds of narrow-reading activities to support vocabulary acquisition.

- Collect newspaper stories on a continuing topic for students to read. Be certain each story is one that will appeal to them.

- Ask students to bring in magazines on subjects they like. Have them read several articles from the magazines.
- Use the Internet—there is a wide variety of texts available on almost any topic.
- Assign books for the students to read. The vocabulary in any given novel tends to recycle.
- Have students read texts written by a single author.

Finally, do not underestimate the power of read-alouds in supporting vocabulary development. Freeman and Freeman (2000) pointed to a study in which teachers read aloud a story to students three times a day for a week. Group vocabulary scores rose by 40%. “The key was finding interesting books and coaching teachers to use reading techniques such as pointing to pictures, gesturing, and paraphrasing...to be sure students understood the story” (p. 123).

Many possible approaches

In classrooms that are becoming increasingly diverse, culturally relevant teaching is an important component of literacy instruction. Culturally relevant teaching is “the kind of teaching that is designed not merely to *fit* the school culture to the students’ culture but also to *use* student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 142).

Effective literacy instruction is not simply a collection of strategies and approaches that will help English-language learners succeed in mainstream classrooms. The environment in which ELLs study and learn is at least as important as the methods, strategies, and approaches you may choose to employ. Using a culturally relevant teaching approach means that students’ second languages can be viewed as an additive to the classroom environment, rather than as a deficit that needs to be remedied. Realize that academic language proficiency in a second language takes a long time to develop. To facilitate that process, permit students to use their native languages when necessary (Nichols, Rupley, & Webb-Johnson, 2000). The classroom needs to be a validating

environment for all students. Williams (2001) suggested asking yourself, “Would I want to be a student in my classroom?” (p. 754).

The strategies listed in this article are not intended to be prescriptive solutions for particular issues in literacy development. They are a few of many possible approaches that can be useful for all students, both native speakers of English as well as English-language learners in the classroom. Like native speakers, “Second language learners benefit from reading programs that incorporate a range of contexts, both social and functional, and in which reading begins, develops, and is used as a means of communication” (Nichols et al., 2000, p. 2).

It is also important to remember the concept of Krashen’s I + 1 (1981), mentioned earlier. Texts must be at a level appropriate to the student’s ability. Recall also that academic language proficiency takes much longer to develop than conversational proficiency. “In other words, encourage students to read at their reading level—not at their oral proficiency level” (Williams, 2001, p. 751). There is nothing like reading to promote reading. “Read aloud to students every day. This practice supports language development...as well as literacy development” (p. 751).

Finally, give students plenty of opportunities to read independently. “People learn to read, and to read better, by reading” (Eskey, 2002, p. 8). Students learn to read well when they are engaged in reading materials that are not only at an appropriate level but also interesting and relevant to them.

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